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WEEKEND BREAK

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A simmering mystery

Astoria author releases restaurant-themed novel

By PATRICK WEBB
For The Astorian

When Astoria resident Jim Hallaux completed his first book, a collaboration with a friend, he was eager to start another. Hallaux recently published “Astoria Steak Deluxe!” a mystery based in a fictional restaurant in modern Astoria.

Hallaux spent about a year working on the novel in between going golfing and managing a remodel project of the Astoria Christian Church.

Hallaux is a 1970 graduate of Astoria High School. His grandparents, Hayes and Catherine Hallaux, operated a downtown art supply, framing and paint store until the 1980s. Hallaux had a career in men’s apparel sales throughout the West Coast, notably in San Diego, California, before moving back to the North Coast a few years ago.

In 2019, Hallaux befriended published author Calvin Cahail through church. The pair collaborated on a coming-of-age novel, “Wind Without Rain.”

Unlike that work, which is set in 1969, Hallaux’s new book is set in modern Astoria. Its cast includes restaurant workers, cops, a city council member and a couple of disreputable characters.

Astoria references are sprinkled throughout, including Gimre’s Shoes, the Silver Salmon Grille, Portway Tavern, Geno’s Pizza and Burgers and Coffee Girl. One of the characters, a part-time restaurant employee, works at John Jacob Astor Elementary School.

Hallaux savors Astoria’s rich cultural history. He refers to shanghaiing when describing piers, which play a role in the novel’s action. He also recognizes the contribution of Chinese residents, enshrined in the Garden of Surging Waves.

In a nod to myriad dubious investors who sidle up periodically, eager to pillage Astoria, the book begins just after carpetbaggers — who envision a lavish, 18-story riverfront resort, mega-yacht marina and high-end golf course abutting Fort Clatsop — flee town.

Ego

Like most writers living in an intimate community, Hallaux maintains no one he depicts is based on anyone he has met.

‘ASTORIA STEAK DELUXE!’

A mystery novel by Jim Hallaux
Available at Godfather’s Books in Astoria and amazon.com, \$14.95

“All of the characters are made out of whole cloth,” he said. “Many of the stories are true, things that people have told me. I carry a little notebook.”

The novel’s main characters are the restaurant’s owner — known only as “Chef” — and the likable but troubled restaurant manager, Charlie, “a positive leader and a terrible delegator.”

Five other named staff contribute to the story. Chef is obnoxious to everyone.

“If a plate doesn’t meet his approval, his reaction is immediate: lewd, crude and loud,” Hallaux writes.

Chef labels his walk-in freezer the “Cathedral of Meat.” He fiercely guards his staff from accessing it.

“He is the edge of a cliché with the huge ego,” Hallaux said. “He needed to be ‘bigger than life’ to bring out the other staff.”

Chef’s gruffness is ameliorated when an employee sees him gifting a lavish takeout order to a homeless man.

Mapping out

The gamut of mystery writers runs from Agatha Christie, who began with her denouement and worked back, sprinkling clues with every detail plotted out, to Lee Child, author of the “Jack Reacher” novels, who claims he writes without a clear direction or goal.

Hallaux says his technique fits somewhat in the middle, though he says he already had his ending in mind when he started writing the book. He mapped out the beginning and middle, then fleshed the sections out with details, color and dialogue.

The first 10 pages describe the restaurant’s sweat behind the scenes, a dawn-to-midnight routine of claustrophobic teamwork, fueled by vodka in coffee and tobacco breaks. Hallaux highlights stellar knife skills, the clash of pans, the smell of onions sautéing and the heat from the grills. Amid rich culinary details, there’s

mention of Willapa Bay oysters.

Hallaux spent much of his career traveling, often eating out four times a week — solo, or with customers or colleagues — so he observed restaurant operations. But his only work restaurant experience comes from working as a dishwasher for the Astoria Pig ‘N Pancake — a job he held as a teenager.

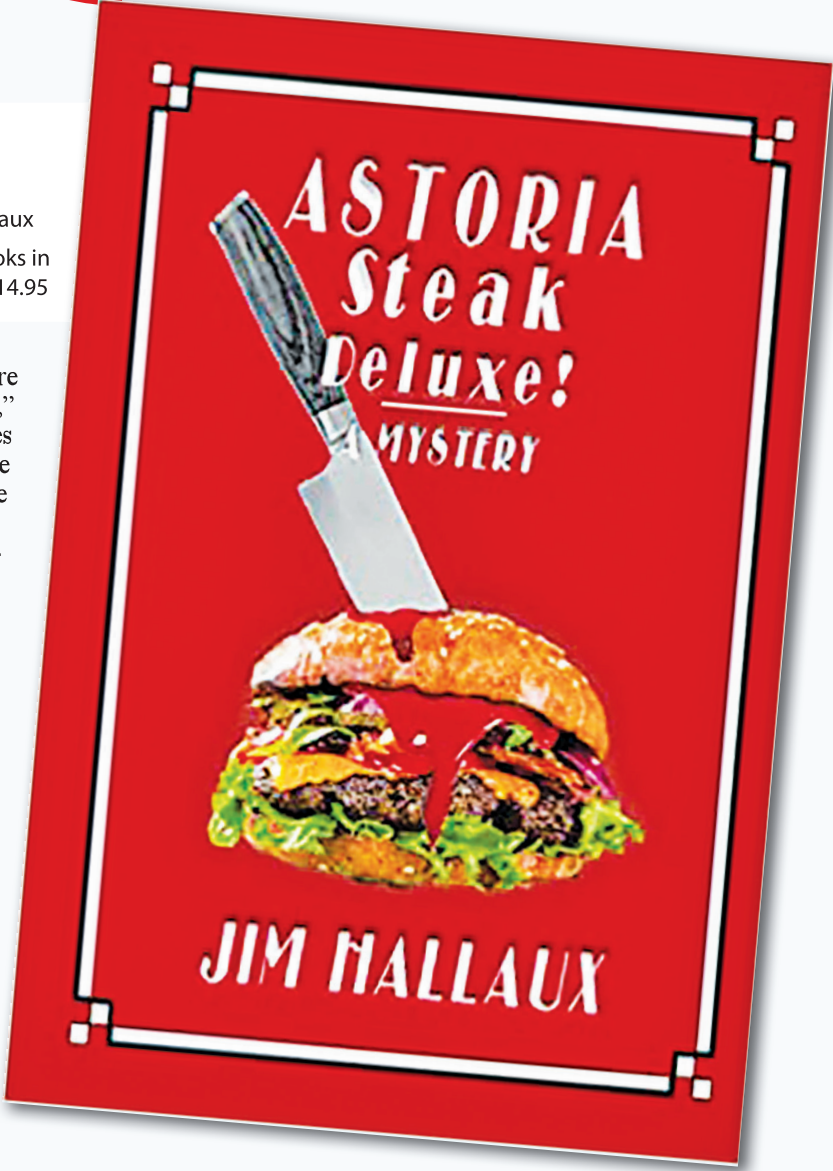
“I like to cook,” he said. “My wife would describe me as a ‘wildly confident but mildly competent’ cook, and certainly a messy one.”

Hallaux said he is thankful for his draft readers, including Cahail, and others who helped him publish the novel.

“I missed (collaborating with Cahail), though, because I had to figure out everything on my own,” Hallaux said. “In the last one, if we got stuck we helped each other. I missed that part of it.”

Next on Hallaux’s to-do list is to write a novel set in Astoria during World War II. Hallaux plans on highlighting the significant military presence guarding the mouth of the Columbia River. The novel will begin with the Japanese bombardment of Fort Stevens in 1942.

Patrick Webb is a former managing editor of The Astorian.



Jim Hallaux
Patrick Webb